

“Working with aggressive and violent parents in Child Protection social work”, Practice, 15(1), 2003

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Abstract: This article examines the findings from research into the effects of parent service user aggression and violence against child protection social workers. First, the types of violence that are most prevalent, and the effects on workers are discussed. Next, the problematic areas to be addressed in order to provide the most effective forms of support and supervision are set out. The links between risks to workers and risks to abused children within violent families are also examined.

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Introduction

This article examines research into the risks posed by aggression and violence against child protection social workers, and how these can best be managed. It is based on interviews with 20 managers in a large county social services department (Littlechild, 2002b) and the findings from previous research comprising questionnaires and interviews with child protection social workers in the same agency (Littlechild, 2000, 2002a). This latter piece of research illustrated the nature of the risks faced by child protection workers, and the effects upon staff of different forms of aggression and violence. It also examined social workers' views on the types of agency and managerial responses which professionals found helpful and unhelpful in

- responding to their own difficulties when victimized
- responding to perpetrators

- protecting both themselves and the children they were working for.

Prior to this research, there had been little work that specifically examined the experiences of practicing social workers and managers in the area of child protection field services. Whilst Balloch *et al.* (1998) discovered that violence is a major cause of stress for social workers, including child protection workers, a review of the current literature and issues concerning violence against social workers by Brockmann (2002) demonstrates that in general little published work focuses specifically on child protection. It would appear there is avoidance of this issue in practice, policy, and research.

Prevalence and nature of aggression and violence.

The perception of most managers was of a much higher level of threats and violence than 10 years previously. Most managers believed that violence and aggression is a feature of the work that is “*never ending*”, and that a certain level of resilience in social workers is now required for them to cope with this. They thought that the role of child protection as currently configured, with its predominately investigative role, itself produces risk of aggression and violence against child protection social workers. This is in accord with research which suggests that issues of power, authority and control-significant features of child protection social work- are central issues for assessment of risk in relation to violence to social work staff (Brown *et al.*, 1986; Stanley and Goddard, 1997, 2002; Pahl, 1999), and how social workers are viewed by clients. All the managers stated that service users initially saw social workers as controlling and critical; however, in the great majority of situations workers achieved reasonable working relationships with them.

Whilst physical violence was comparatively rare, other forms of ‘*indirect violence*’ as one respondent referred to it, were common. In relation to physical violence, social worker respondents usually found managers sympathetic to the problems raised for them by such behaviour, and managers attempted to ensure protective back-up for them (Littlechild, 2000). However, they found procedures and support for the less obvious types of violence, such as threats and intimidation, were less clear and accessible. Social workers were also less likely to report these types of violence and threat.

There were differences in the types of violence displayed by service users depending upon gender. When children were removed from parents in emergency protection procedures, in child protection conferences, at court hearings, or when parents were told of recommendations for care orders in court reports, it was generally the mothers who reacted in a physically violent way. These were also the situations in which physical violence was most likely to occur. The reason for the gender imbalance was judged by managers to be due to the fact that in these situations, it was mothers who were physically present, as males are often much less involved in the process. Additionally, some managers stated that they intervened to a much greater extent with mothers raising children on their own than in situations where lone fathers were raising children. In less obvious but very threatening situations, however, such as where there was sustained verbal abuse and threats, threats to the worker's family, and/or the following of workers in the street or in their cars, males were the main perpetrators.

Fear and anxiety was a regular feature in respondents' reactions to violence, and was particularly problematic in situations where there were developing and threatening violent scenarios where there is a build up of pressures, threats and abuse against the worker over time (Littlechild 2000).

These issues present significant problems for child protection workers, managers and agencies in a small but critical number of threatening and violent situations. Crucially, these types of situation that child protection social workers and their managers have to deal with have been shown to have an association with the most severe forms of child abuse, including deaths. A number of child abuse death inquiry reports have found that workers' fears of family members have been a contributory factor in those deaths (Department of Health, 1991). Reder *et al.* (1993) concluded that contributory factors to diminished protection for the child where deaths had occurred included the dynamics of the relationship between the worker and family members, where the latter experienced their often fragile self esteem undermined by the child protection process, and their control over the situation was challenged. Most recently, in 2002, Leanne Labonte and Dennis Henry were imprisoned for the manslaughter of their 2-year-old daughter. The abusing parents had "*paralysed by fear*" the social workers and health visitors involved (Guardian, 2002).

Examples of violence against workers and the effects on them and the protection of children

One situation reported by a manager concerned “*a serious threat to kill us from someone who had been seriously violent in the past and killed a child*”. An injunction was in place to keep the person away from the office, but the worker was concerned about being followed, and interference and threats involving her family life and personal space outside of work. In another situation there had been threats “*to shoot*” a worker from someone who was known to be capable of such behaviour. One manager was seriously injured by one mother with children on the child protection register, and required a number of operations afterwards.

Managers gave a number of examples of social workers and managers leaving child protection work after severe threats and/or physical violence. One of these involved a situation where a worker’s life was threatened. The worker had subsequently been on long-term sick leave, and then resigned. Another worker had been forced to change her car, and put alarms in her house.

Apart from serious physical violence, orchestrated and repeated threats from parents, and intimidating threats personalized on to the worker and possibly their family, were seen to have the most severe and long-term effects on workers. Such behaviour can destabilize workers’ professional self-image and affect their capacity to carry out effective work.

One worker had felt too intimidated to tell her manager for a very long time about one drug-abusing parent who made racist remarks that were linked to threatening, aggressive and violent behaviour. She had also been unable to challenge this parent’s behaviour.

Stanley and Goddard (1997, 2002) suggest from their research into the effects of violence against child protection social workers in Australia that the Stockholm syndrome (Wardlaw, 1982) can apply to social workers in child protection settings. This theory explores the accommodation of aggression by the victim within the relationships between hostage and terrorist. Stanley and Goddard also argue the same dynamics can apply to relationships in and surrounding abusing families. In addition, bullying, which is how some workers can experience the behaviour of such abusive parents, can also produce fear and disempowerment in adults in work situations (Randall, 1996).

In accordance with Stanley and Goddard's findings, one manager believed that some workers can collude- maybe unwittingly- with the oppression from some of the abusive parents/carers they are working with. A number of managers stated that supervisors need to use supervision to uncover such effects on workers, within a process where the worker feels safe to report and explore this difficult territory. If this is not done the family can prevent challenges about their abusive parenting. This can mean that work to reduce the risk for children is more limited, as workers may be unable to divulge these issues to their agency or supervisor. When this happens, they are exhibiting the same reactions as some other abused family members to severe intimidation and threat (e.g. **Mudaly and Goddard, 2001**), and are joining in the family dynamics rather than remaining outside- and are therefore unable to objectively assess, and work with, them (Reder *et al.*, 1993).

One manager, echoing views of a number of the managers, stated that the impact on workers of different types of aggression and violence on assessment and practice *"could be massive. I think a worker who is intimidated or lacking confidence is not going to come to the correct conclusions"*.

The avoidance of conflict and challenge

The majority of managers believed that a small number of service users employ aggression and violence as tactics or strategies to deflect from the issues of abuse and protection: *"they want us to withdraw, and that is why they are threatening us- it is to get us out"*, or they try to *"put workers off the scent"*. One stated that he thought that *a "small minority do use certain tactics to divert the workers from exploring and confronting the real problems- i.e. the treatment of the children by the adults. The department has not seized the nettle – more could be done, but it also puts workers more at risk"*.

Reder *et al.* (1993) note how parents can avoid social workers', and other professionals', interventions in a variety of ways; the research findings presented in this article confirm that aggression and violence displayed by parents should be seen in the same vein.

Several managers stated that when workers avoided being clear about their role and the perceived problems in the family, it could make it much more difficult for other workers later in the process, and for the child protection

process itself. This matter they believed needed to be covered in training, and in supervision. Problems occurred when workers were not

1. clear about their remit
2. open and honest with managers and service users
3. stating their role, remit and powers skillfully and firmly with service users.

There were also inter-agency risk factors arising from such avoidance by other professionals. One of the most problematic areas for workers and managers was where threatening males had to be challenged about their behaviour which had been experienced but not dealt with by other agencies prior to their involvement with social services; such that it was the experience of the managers that in the main it was left so that it was "*Social Services staff that have to say 'no, that will not do' "*".

The need for appropriate use of authority in child protection work has been noted in a number of child abuse death inquiry reports and government publications (e.g. London Borough of Brent 1985; Department of Health 1988, 1991; Reder *et al.* 1993), and issues arising from the effects of the power and control inherent in the child protection role are examined by Stanley and Goddard (1997, 2002). A number of managers believed that power and control dynamics within situations that can affect workers and their assessments and interventions were not sufficiently taken into account when planning and reviewing the work.

Humphreys (1999) demonstrated that child protection social workers' approaches, and their agencies' policies and procedures, often minimized the effects and meaning of violence displayed by males against mothers in child protection situations, which results in this significant problem within families often being avoided. This issue of avoidance is also relevant when aggression and violence against child protection social workers from parent service users is a feature; in the research presented in this article, work with the service users on their part in the aggression was shown as poorly developed within the agency.

Visiting in pairs was seen to be one of the best practical preventive factors, and several managers believed two workers were necessary for effective assessment and intervention with aggressive or threatening service users. Co-working was seen by several managers to be important on several levels:

1. Modelling for new workers from experienced workers
2. Ensuring that difficult family dynamics do not overwhelm a single worker
3. Providing personal safety.

Supervision

The importance of skilled supervision which places particular emphasis on the need to focus on dealing with the stresses and anxieties arising for child protection workers is set out by a number of authors (e.g. Richards *et al.* 1990; Jones *et al.*, 1991; Rushton and Nathan, 1996). Gibbs (2001) argues that supervision is a vital element in workers' ability to maintain themselves whilst dealing with these stresses and to sustain the focus of their work. However, a number of managers saw supervision as too task centred; they believed that there needed to be more time to explore the worker's experiences of trying to effectively carry out those tasks.

A number of workers were judged by managers to require careful supervision and monitoring in order to minimize the possible effects on them of threats and violent behaviour and potentially on their ability to protect the child(ren) involved. Whilst the nature of the work required managers to bear this in mind constantly, two groups of workers were seen as being particularly vulnerable; those who were inexperienced, and those who did not feel they have the right and/or the confidence to carry out the control elements that have to be utilized in protection work.

Supervision skills were seen to be important to support the worker, and also to assess over time if role conflict, role ambiguity and aggression were affecting the protection work. Supervision skills were also seen to be important in ensuring the worker is not becoming potentially dangerous by putting themselves and/or the child (ren) at risk by avoiding- consciously or otherwise- the effect of parent service user threat in their work. The potential dangerousness of workers who are severely stressed and unsupported is noted by Dale *et al.* (1986) and by Reder *et al.* (1993).

A market-oriented approach, where the 'customer is always right', problematises the experience of the worker who is being abused by such a 'consumer'. In a pseudo-market where it is assumed that consumers' needs will be met, within what essentially is a control function rather than a service function (Bell, 1999; Parton and O'Byrne, 2000), problems are created

because service users, particularly parents, can feel that workers are duplicitous and dishonest, and this will affect how they relate to the worker. Workers are expected to provide a supportive function and working in partnership with parents, whilst at the same time having to judge their parenting, and in certain circumstances apply for their children to be removed from them, leading to role ambiguity and conflict (Littlechild, 2002b).

The most effective ways of dealing with violence and conflict

A number of the managers stated that one of the most effective ways of dealing with violent or aggressive behaviour is to give immediate feedback to service users on non-acceptability of abusive, intimidatory or violent behaviour, and set clear limits and boundaries for them.

One manager saw the need for three levels of response following violence or threats:

- 1 *Personal support* for the worker emotionally and professionally
- 2 *Tactical*, for the particular situation with that service user
- 3 *Strategic*, which takes into account the policies, procedures and physical safety provisions of the Department.

Managers stated that a relationship of trust and confidence between the social worker and the manager is the most vital element of support for the worker, within which the worker is able to say they do not feel capable to challenge the service user or to carry out a piece of work effectively- an approach discouraged by managerialism which eschews such process and emotion based considerations (Harlow, 2000). The supervisor then needs to respond by considering how protection work can best be carried out by the worker, including dealing with the issues of the violence against the worker and the potential effects on the child.

Managers stated that the most important attributes for workers in dealing with the ever-present prospect of violence was to have a high level of skill, confidence and assertiveness in engaging and maintaining relationships with service users. Most believed that workers needed better training and support to have a secure and confident professional self-esteem in order to deliver effective interventions and assessments. The managers stated that there are sophisticated skills required in both challenging service users' behaviour and attitudes, and in making service users feel important as part of the work, by

giving positive feedback if they have made efforts to change, both in their parenting and in behaviour to staff.

Several managers saw the need to update risk assessments over time, due to the potential problem of the build up of pressures on the workers within developing violent scenarios. All referred to the constant tensions and conflicts of balancing the safety of the worker, the service to the family, and the protection of the child, which was not always recognised by higher managers.

Clear ideas about risk assessment and risk management had been developed by respondents who had experienced or managed violence, and these experiences can be used by agencies in a structured manner in developing systems which take into account the risks to staff and children from violent families (Littlechild, 2000a, 2002b).

Conclusion

Agencies need to ensure that policies, training and induction processes include consideration of strategies workers and managers might utilise in situations of aggression and violence from parent service users; give licence to workers on how they can best respond to such threats and violence; give information about how they are expected by the agency to respond within policies; and explain what support they will get from the agency when so responding.

Workers can be at risk if not supported and supervised by managers who understand the stresses arising from working with threatening and violent parent service users, and the appropriate response for the worker and the perpetrator. The effects of these stresses on workers, how they might affect their assessments and interventions in child protection work, and how they can be considered within risk assessments, are explored by Littlechild (2002b). In addition, strategies need to be put into place which challenge violent parents/carers, whilst protecting the workers from the extra risk they may be put into by so challenging. If not, we may be compromising not only the safety, well being and retention of workers, but also the safety of children in the minority of families who threaten social workers in child protection work.

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